



THERAPEUTIC
EDGE

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Free Knee Replacement Recovery Roadmap

A practical guide to help you understand what usually matters most during each stage of recovery, how to think about swelling and stiffness, and how to know when to progress, hold steady, or modify.



Know what to focus on, what usually matters most, and how to make better day-to-day decisions during recovery.



1. Clear phases:

What usually matters most from the first few weeks through later recovery.



2. Swelling and stiffness:

How to think about them without overreacting or ignoring them.



3. Progress decisions:

When to move forward, when to hold steady, and when to modify.



4. Useful next steps:

Practical guidance you can actually use right away.





— START HERE

The point of this roadmap

This roadmap is designed to help you understand what usually matters most during each stage of recovery, how to think about swelling and stiffness, and how to know when to progress, hold steady, or modify.

“ Recovery is not about doing more at any cost. It is about doing the right work at the right time, then adjusting based on how your knee responds.



Calm the knee

Early recovery is about keeping swelling and pain controlled, using frequent motion, and avoiding wild day-to-day swings.



Restore motion

Straightening the knee, bending it gradually, and walking more normally usually matter a lot early.



Rebuild strength and confidence

As swelling settles, progressive strength, walking tolerance, and function become more important.

This guide will help you:



Understand the recovery phases

See what usually matters most in each stage and how focus shifts over time.



Know what to track

Focus on the right data—your symptoms, motion, function, and activity response.



Adjust without guessing

Make informed choices about when to progress, hold steady, or modify.



Recognize warning signs

Spot red flags early so you can get the right help and protect your progress.



THE BIG PICTURE

Recovery phases at a glance

Recovery is not perfectly linear. Surgery, complications, medical history, pre-op strength, pain sensitivity, and home support all matter. The timeline below is a useful map, not a promise.

Week 0–2	Protect the knee, manage swelling, begin walking, start straightening the knee, and restore gentle bend.
Week 3–6	Restore motion, improve gait, build simple strength, and increase tolerance for daily activity.
Week 7–12	Build a repeatable routine, improve stair function, walk longer, and progress strengthening.
Months 3–4	Strength and daily function: more demanding walking, better confidence, and improved control with daily tasks.
Months 4–6	Capacity and confidence: longer activity tolerance, more function, and better recovery after activity.
6+ months	Maintain the gains: keep moving, keep strengthening, and keep healthy habits going.



Really check: the knee does not improve in a perfectly straight line. Swelling, stiffness, sleep, weather, stress, and activity spikes can all change how you feel. The useful question is: What did my knee tolerate, and what should I repeat or adjust?



DECISION RULES

The 24-hour response rule

Pain during exercise tells only part of the story. Your knee's response later that day and the next morning often tells you more.



Green light

Pain stays mild, swelling does not meaningfully increase, sleep is okay, and the knee feels the same or better the next morning.



Yellow light





The knee feels more full or sore but settles by the next morning. Hold steady or make a small adjustment.



Red light

Pain spikes, limping gets worse, swelling clearly increases, or the knee feels worse the next day. Modify the dose or back off.

Track these four signals

-  Pain with and after exercise
-  Early-morning swelling, stiffness, or heat
-  Confidence walking, sitting, stairs, or sleep
-  Whether the knee feels better, the same, or worse the next day

The best progress cue

Can I do useful work today and still be able to move well tomorrow?

If the answer is yes, your dose is probably close.
If the answer is no, your knee is telling you to adjust.

- reduce reps
- use a smaller range
- split the work into shorter sessions



PHASE PRIORITIES

What to focus on by phase

Phase	What usually matters most	What to watch
Week 0-2	calm swelling, get the knee as straight as possible, begin gentle bend, short frequent walks, simple quad activation.	wound issues, calf pain, severe swelling, or inability to get near full extension.
Week 3-6	continue ROM, improve gait, increase simple strengthening, and do more normal daily activity.	overdoing it, limping more, or a spike in swelling and stiffness the next day.
Week 7-12	strengthen quads, hips, and calf; improve stairs; walk longer; build a repeatable routine.	persistent swelling, extension loss, or pain controlling every decision.
Months 3-4	build endurance, control, and tolerance for daily tasks and longer activity.	doing more activity but not recovering well from it.
Months 4-6	progress higher-demand function, walking tolerance, balance, and return toward hobbies or gym work.	doing too much too fast.
6+ months	maintain strength, activity, and healthy habits.	stopping all strengthening once pain is better.

Phase mindset



0-6 weeks:
calm work matters



6-12 weeks:
build consistency



3-4 months:
capacity matters



6+ months:
keep the gains



Good recovery is not passive. The evidence base supports early mobility, range-of-motion work, strength, and appropriately progressed strengthening after total knee replacement. The exact dose should match the person in front of you.

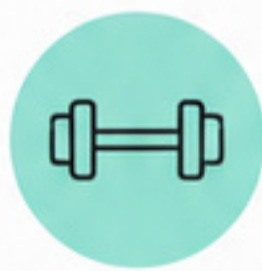
THE MAIN ISSUES

Motion, strength, and swelling control



1. Motion

Getting the knee near full straight early usually matters more than chasing big bend right away. Bending often improves with time, swelling control, and frequent motion. Frequent gentle movement usually works better than occasional aggressive pushing.



2. Strength

Quad weakness after surgery is common. Simple repeated strengthening usually matters more than perfect exercise variety. Quality, consistency, and repeatable work beat max effort.



3. Swelling load

A swollen knee often feels stiff and weak. Too much swelling can limit motion and shut down your quad. Load the knee, then let it recover. Use elevation, compression, ice if advised, and adjust volume when the knee puffs up.

Use this when you feel stuck



If bending feels stuck

Frequent heel slides, gentle bends, short bike rocking if appropriate.



If walking feels off

Use the walker or cane as long as needed, focus on smoother steps before speed.



If stairs are hard

Use the rail, smaller dose, step-to pattern if needed, practice often but not exhaustively.



If the knee keeps swelling

Back off the dose for 24–48 hours, keep walking easy, prioritize frequent motion and recovery basics.

Five mistakes that slow people down



1. Chasing a big day

One unusually busy day can leave the knee angry for the next one or two days. Aim for repeatable work, not heroic days.



2. Forcing motion through high pain

Frequent, gentle motion usually works better than aggressive stretching that makes the knee guard more.



3. Quitting strength too early

Feeling better is not the same as being strong enough. Strength still matters after the pain settles.



4. Comparing timelines

Your knee may move slower or faster than someone else's. Compare your recovery to your own trend, not someone else's week count.



5. Ignoring swelling

A warm, puffy knee is useful information. It often means the dose exceeded what the knee could recover from.



Useful question

What is the smallest change that lets this feel repeatable tomorrow?

Useful changes may include fewer reps, smaller range, more rest between sets, or splitting the work into shorter sessions.



Small, steady adjustments beat big swings. Aim for progress you can **repeat**.



SELF-CHECK WORKSHEET

Your weekly recovery snapshot

Use this simple check-in to notice patterns. You do not need perfect days to improve, but your knee should show a general trend over time.

 **Pain at rest**

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

No pain Worst pain

 **Pain with exercise**

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

No pain Worst pain

 **Swelling today**

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

None Severe


 **Knee stiffness**

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

None Very stiff

Functional marker to retest

 Choose one simple marker and track it each week under similar conditions.

My marker: _____


Baseline (date): _____ This week: _____

 **This week I can...**

- Straighten the knee more easily
- Bend enough for common daily tasks
- Walk with less limp
- Use stairs with better confidence
- Tolerate exercise with less swelling

 **My next adjustment is...**

- Progress a small amount
- Hold steady
- Reduce reps or range
- Add a recovery day
- Focus on walking and motion first

 **Do not chase one perfect day.**
 Look for a trend in pain, swelling, motion, confidence, walking tolerance, stair tolerance, and next-day stiffness.



SAFETY FIRST

When to **contact your care team**

This page is for education, not diagnosis. Always follow your surgeon's instructions.



1. Possible infection or wound issues

- Fever of 100.4°F (38°C) or higher
- Drainage from the incision that is cloudy, yellow, or foul-smelling
- Redness spreading around the incision
- Increasing warmth or pain
- Wound edges opening or not staying closed



2. Possible blood clot or breathing signs

URGENT / EMERGENCY

- Calf pain or tenderness with swelling, redness, or warmth
- Sudden shortness of breath
- Chest pain, especially with deep breaths or coughing
- Feeling lightheaded, faint, or unwell



3. Other reasons to ask for help

- Knee gives way (buckles) or locks
- Fall or sudden setback
- Sudden loss of motion
- Worsening swelling that is not settling with rest and elevation
- Inability to bear weight or put pressure on the leg



4. What to say when you call

- Date of your surgery
- Your symptoms
- When the symptoms started
- What has changed or gotten worse
- Whether you have fever, drainage, calf pain, or chest symptoms
- Whether things are improving or worsening



If you have chest pain or sudden shortness of breath, seek emergency care.



— NEXT STEP

Use the roadmap, then follow the plan

A roadmap tells you where you are. A plan tells you what to do next.

The best recovery work is clear, repeatable, and adjustable as your knee changes.



Today

Pick your phase, choose one marker, use frequent motion, and notice how the knee responds later that day and the next morning.



This week

Work your plan, keep your recovery basics steady, and make small adjustments based on tolerance.



This month

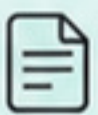
Look for trends in pain, swelling, walking, motion, and daily confidence instead of one unusually good day.



Want a more guided phase-by-phase recovery plan?

The Therapeutic Edge Total Knee Replacement Recovery Guide includes clear exercise plans, practical check-ins, focused support tracks, and patient-friendly coaching to help you know what to do, when to progress, and how to adjust.

→ [Learn more at mytherapeuticedge.com](https://mytherapeuticedge.com)



Evidence and balanced sources

- ✓ APTA Clinical Practice Guideline for Total Knee Arthroplasty
- ✓ American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons (AAOS) patient resources
- ✓ American Association of Hip and Knee Surgeons (AAHKS) patient resources

Educational resource only. Not a substitute for individual medical advice.

